

1984

INTRODUCTION

During the 16th and 17th centuries, the Netherlands, or Low Countries, was engaged in a seemingly futile struggle for independence against the most dominant power of the times, Spain. This War of Liberation reflected the wide range of religions, economic, and political forces that influenced the social fabric of Europe subsequent to the Renaissance. It was a complex era that evoked feelings ranging from the basest to the most sublime. The saga includes tales of compassion and intrigue, bravery and man's inhumanity to man.

This brief historical account is an attempt to reveal the background responsible for the most prolific production of obsidional, or siege, coins. There were more than 30 instances necessitating this type of emergency money.¹ This is not to say that such coinage is common. On the contrary, most pieces are quite scarce and can be very expensive. Nevertheless, they stand as testaments to those who were enmeshed in turmoil, leaving for us today an exciting area of numismatics.

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7/3/84

BACKGROUND

It is not easy to deal with a major historical event in simplistic terms; however, the chronology presented herein does have three basic components: (1) the emotional fervor of religion, (2) the practical reality of economics, and (3) the ever-present element of politics.

The most politically significant turn of events came when Charles V of Spain transferred sovereignty of the Low Countries to his son Philip II. At this point in history the Low Countries were comprised of a loosely associated cluster of provinces. Philip II mishandled his responsibility through a series of bungled diplomatic maneuvers. Unlike his father, he had no basic understanding of the people placed under his direction. Charles V spoke the language; Philip II did not. Charles V was raised in Brussels; Philip II was considered a foreigner. The situation was not ideal from the outset.

The religious element was a decisive factor in the development of hostilities despite the fact that the Dutch people at the time were overwhelmingly Roman Catholic. Their theological basis was in the liberal tradition of Erasmus versus the conservative line of the Spanish Church. Nevertheless, Protestant religions, especially Calvinism, seeped into the Low Countries during the early part of the 16th century due to the fact that it was a major center for trade.

This period was also known for the Inquisition. Under Charles' reign, the Low Countries were subjected to the papal form of the Inquisition where laws were rarely enforced. An incident at Rotterdam involving the rescue of several heretics from burning at the stake made Philip introduce the Spanish form of the Inquisition. This did little to promote allegiance to Spain.

Calvinism thrived in the mercantile atmosphere of the Low Countries. Businessmen liked the role of the laity in Calvinist congregations. The Roman Catholic church was viewed as an unyielding patriarch and the pompous hierarchy of the Roman Catholic church was resented even though Catholicism had respect as an important social, moral, and political force. Merchants welcomed the "new" religion.

Not to be taken lightly was the imposition of taxes on the businesses and people of the Low Countries. The taxation was unilateral in nature: it was levied by a foreign political entity and the benefit derived from the taxes went to Spain. Spain was building an empire, and the Low Countries paid dearly.

CHRONOLOGY

In 1559 Philip appointed Margaret of Parma as governess. She held little power since her authority had been carefully limited by advisors designated by Philip. This was a means of preserving absolute control over the Low Countries and it was an excellent vehicle to promote the spread of the Inquisition. Hardly a day passed without an execution. Protestant authorities substantiate a number of accounts associated with the "justice" of Philip. One account reveals an incident where an Anabaptist was hacked to death with seven blows of a rusty sword in the presence of his wife, who died at the horror of the sight. Another tells of an enraged man who interrupted Christmas Mass, took the host, and trampled it. He was put to torture by having his right hand and foot burned away to the bone. His tongue was torn out, he was suspended over a fire and was slowly roasted to death.² Margaret interceded but the atrocities continued.

Even the Catholics now joined with Protestants³ as Philip stated that he would rather sacrifice a hundred thousand lives than change his policy.⁴ Some diplomacy was used and when a compromise was reached on May 6, 1566, Philip eased off. During the ensuing lull, Protestants brought their worship into the open. A group called "The Beggars" grew in strength and proceeded to raise a sizeable army.

On August 6, 1566, Philip signed a formal instrument declaring that his offer of pardon had been gotten from him against his will. He claimed that he was not bound by the compromise of May 6th and a few days later, Philip assured the Pope that any suspension of the Inquisition was subject to papal approval.⁵ The destruction of 30 churches and monasteries followed. Protestants entered

cathedrals smashing holy objects, breaking up altars and statues and smashing stained glass windows. Bodies were exhumed and corpses were stripped. Numbers of malcontents drank sacramental wine and burned missals. One Count fed the Eucharistic wafers to his parrot in defiance. It was well known that most Protestant leaders condemned the violence perpetrated by the angry mobs, but the pillage and destruction of property was considered far less criminal than burning heretics at the stake. On the political front, William of Orange saw the opportunity to amass support for a large-scale insurrection aimed at procuring independence from Spain. Philip became dissatisfied with Margaret, and seized the opportunity to relieve her. The choice was crucial. Instead of selecting a successor trained in handling diplomacy, Philip sent the Duke of Alva to crush the malcontents.

Philip gave full power to Alva in 1567. Alva's judgment was that of a soldier trained in Spanish discipline and piety. His object was to crush the rebels without mercy on the basis that every concession strengthens the opposition. Alva handpicked an army of 10,000 men. He issued them the finest in armor while attending to their baser needs by hiring 2,000 prostitutes, all properly enrolled and assigned. Alva installed himself as Governor General and appointed a Council of Troubles which the terrified Protestants renamed "The Council of Blood." There were nine members: seven Dutch and two Spanish. Only the two Spanish members had the power to vote, with Alva personally retaining the right of final decision on any case that interested him. Through a network of spies and informers, hardly a family in Flanders did not mourn some member arrested or killed. One morning, 1,500 were seized in their sleep and sent to jail. There were short trials held, often on the spot, for 40 or 50 at a time. In January, 1568, 84 people were executed from Valenciennes alone. William of Orange decided to strike back at Spain,

clung to the old faith, sometimes after incredible tortures. One Protestant historian wrote:

On more than one occasion men were seen hanging . . . their own brothers, who had been taken prisoners in the enemy ranks . . . The islanders found fierce pleasure in these acts of cruelty. A Spaniard had ceased to be human in their eyes.

On one occasion a surgeon at Veer cut the heart from a Spanish prisoner, nailed it on a vessel's prow, and invited the townsmen to come and fasten their teeth in it, which many did with savage satisfaction.⁷

While Alva rested, he sent his son Don Federigo to revenge the Beggar's atrocities. Don Federigo's troops indiscriminately sacked homes, monasteries, and churches. They stole the jewels and costly robes of the religious. They trampled consecrated hosts, butchered men and violated women. No distinction was made between Catholic or Protestant. His army crushed the weak defenses of Zutphen (Gelderland) and put nearly every man in town to death, hanging some by the feet while drowning 500 others. Sometime later after brief resistance, Little Naarden surrendered to the Spaniards. They greeted the victorious soldiers with tables set with feasts. The soldiers ate, drank, then killed every person in the town. Don Federigo's army later attempted to besiege Alkmaar but the rebels won by opening the dikes and routing the Spanish troops. When the Don Federigo came to Haarlem a brutal battle ensued. Haarlem was a Calvinist center that was known for its enthusiastic support of the rebels. A garrison of 4,000 troops defended the city with such intensity that Don Federigo contemplated withdrawing. His father, Alva, threatened to disown him if he stopped the siege, so the

barbarities intensified. Each army hung captives on crosses facing the enemy. The Dutch defenders taunted the Spanish besiegers by staging parodies of Catholic rituals on the cities ramparts.⁸ William sent 3,000 men in an effort to relieve Haarlem. They were destroyed and subsequent efforts to save the city were futile. After seven months, where the city's inhabitants had been reduced to eating weeds and heather, the city surrendered (July 11, 1573). Most of the 1,600 surviving defenders were put to death and 400 leading citizens were executed. Those that were spared were shown mercy only because they agreed to pay a fine of 250,000 guilders, a sizeable sum even by today's standards. This was considered the last and most costly victory of Alva's regime. The Bishop of Namur estimated that in seven years, Alva had done more to harm Catholicism than Luther or Calvin had done in a generation.⁹ A new Governor of the Netherlands followed.

In 1573, the states of Holland and Zeeland raised war funds by increasing the value of the silver coinage by 1/8 as a war contribution. Each coin whose value was in excess of 1/10 daalder was counterstamped with a shield or lion of the respective province.

Don Louis de Requesens took over jurisdiction of the Low Countries for the brief period between 1573 and 1576. He was surprised at the number and spirit of the Dutch:

Before my arrival I did not understand how they could maintain such considerable fleets, while your Majesty could not support a single one. It appears, however, that men who are fighting for their lives, their firesides, their property, and their religion--for their own cause, in short--are contented to receive rations only, without receiving pay.¹⁰

He petitioned Philip to (1) grant a general amnesty except for persistent heretics, (2) let them emigrate, and (3) abolish the 10% tax. Since no immediate action was taken by Philip, William of Orange chose to regard the inaction as a delay tactic. The war continued during which time Leyden was put to siege in 1575. This was the same year that Philip went bankrupt.

A year later Don Luis died while besieging Zeirikzee. Philip's half brother, the famous Don Juan, was placed in charge of the Spanish troops who, feeling cheated at not being able to pillage Zeirikzee, mutinied and began a campaign of indiscriminate plunder and violence. This "Spanish Fury" was used by William to reinforce his arguments to ally all the Netherlands' provinces with him. The Union of Brussels was formed only to dissolve later out of intolerance towards the religious diversity of its members. Calvinists began their wave of uncontrolled atrocities aimed at the Catholics. This divisiveness gave Spain the opportunity to send Alessandro Farnese with 20,000 well-trained troops into the Netherlands. Groningen, Breda, Campen, Antwerp, and Brussels, among others, were put to siege.

Farnese, the son of Margaret of Parma, was the ablest general of Spain. In January, 1579, a group of Catholic nobles formed a League for the protection of their religion and property. Later that same month Friesland, Gelderland, Groningen, Holland, Overijssel, Utrecht and Zeeland formed the United Provinces which became the Dutch Netherlands of today. The remaining provinces became the Spanish Netherlands and in the 19th century became Belgium. Farnese soon regained nearly all the Southern provinces for Spain.

Further north, the city of Maastricht was besieged on March 12, 1579. Farnese's attackers tunneled an extensive network of passages in order to enter the city beneath its walled defenses. The defenders dug tunnels

to meet them. Battles were fought fiercely in underground caverns with limited maneuvering capabilities. Hundreds of besiegers were scalded or choked to death when boiling water was poured into the tunnels or fires were lit to fill them with smoke. In an attempt to mine the city, 500 of Farnese's own men were killed when the explosives detonated prematurely. It took more than four months but the besiegers finally breached the wall and entered the city at night. Catching the exhausted defenders sleeping, they massacred 6,000 men, women and children. Of the city's 30,000 population, only 400 survived.

Maastricht was a major disaster for the Protestant cause and the Dutch began to turn on William of Orange. After several unsuccessful attempts, William was assassinated in 1584 and died penniless. Spain had taken the upper hand on land but the Beggars still controlled the sea. Queen Elizabeth of England began to aid the Northern provinces and actually sent troops there in 1585. While Philip wasted Farnese with ridiculous and useless battles against England and France, Spain had become spread too thin. The Spanish Armada suffered defeat at the hands of the English in 1588 and the situation in the Netherlands became increasingly difficult to manage.

Maurice of Nassau, William's son, had studied mathematics and applied the latest techniques in science to ballistics and siege warfare. He recaptured Deventer, Groningen, Nijmegen and Zutphen.

In 1592, Farnese died of wounds and exhaustion. Philip II died in 1598. As the period of sieges subsided, the War of Liberation continued. Archduke Albert and Isabel of Austria were given sovereign rights in the Netherlands forming a truce in 1609 that gave the Dutch a brief respite from war. But,

in 1621, 12 years later, the war resumed when the Netherlands reverted back to Spain when Albert and Isabel died childless.

This period never experienced the fury of the early sieges; however, the struggle for independence went on. Attacks on Dutch border towns were made (i.e. Frankenthal, 1625) by Spinola, an Italian banker who pledged allegiance to Spain. Spain made progress in trying to suppress the Dutch but the Dutch recovered. They were financially supported by France and the money was poured into ships since Spain's control of the seas had been broken by England.

Deeply involved in the Thirty Years' War, Spain decided to yield everything to the Dutch in order to be free to fight the French. The Treaty of Westphalia was signed on January 30, 1648, ending the War of Liberation. The Dutch had finally won their independence.

FOOTNOTES

1. A chronological listing is available in Maillet's Monnaies Obsidionales et de Necessite, Bruxelles (1870, 1973).
2. Motley, J.L., The Dutch Republic, New York (1883), Vol. I, pp. 283 - 290.
3. Geyl, P., Revolt of the Netherlands, London (1945), p. 86.
4. Cambridge Modern History, New York (1907), Vol. III, p. 200.
5. Ibid., pp. 207 - 8.
6. Blok, P.J., History of the People of the Netherlands, New York (1898), Vol. III, p. 42.
7. Op. Cit., Motley, Vol. II, p. 151.
8. Ibid., p. 101.
9. Pastor, L., History of the Popes, St. Louis (1898), Vol. XX, p. 3.
10. Op. Cit., Motley, p. 169.

The topic of siege coins has fascinated me ever since I held a tiny irregular piece of metal stamped by Frederick Pythion during the siege of Julich in 1621. Years ago a local coin dealer "threw in" a 2 sol Julich siege coin as an inducement to purchase several reference works by John Davenport. Wishing to know more about this coin and the complex area of numismatics surrounding it, I proceeded to ask for information from those who were more learned and established in numismatic circles. I was led to an article by Moritz Wormser in The Numismatist, January, 1915: "German Siege Pieces From the 16th to the 18th Century". Later I found a copy of Catalogue des Monnaies Obsidionales et de Necessite by Lt. Colonel Prosper Mailliet (now in reprint) and have continued my pursuit until now, where it has become a passion. It is with enthusiasm that I attempt a brief introduction to obsidional (or siege) coins.

Although most people would begin with a definition, I prefer a narrative similar to Colonel Mailliet's (Māy-ā) description of siege money in the preface to the sale of his personal collection (Collection Mailliet, Delere and Peteghen, Paris, 1886). As suggested by the word "siege", the monies referred to here represent times that one would just as soon forget. The history that surrounds these coins harbors many accounts of sadness, inhumanity, and horror. If one would take time to read excerpts from Motley's Rise of the Dutch Republic it would become evident that the people who lived through these times could hardly be blamed for not preserving siege pieces from destruction. Essentially, the common practice was to redeem the coins subsequent to the battle so that their full value may be received in whatever "coins of the realm" were legal. This, perhaps, more than anything else contributes to their excessive rarity.

(There are several exceptions to the practice of redemption and/or de-

struction of the coins. One custom was for successful warriors and townspeople to pierce the coins or attach mounts so that they may be worn as charms or amulets. Another was the production of "presentation" siege pieces (struck after the siege). Groningen (1672) is most notable for this.)

Although the 16th century Low Countries produced the largest number of siege pieces, these "little monuments" were produced wherever and whenever necessary. They were produced in many varied shapes and sizes: Round- Cattaro (1813), Leyden (1574); Triangular- Julich (1543); Quadrangular- Campen (1578), Brussels (1579-80), Groningen (1672); Octagonal- Amsterdam (1578), Braunau (1743), Pontefract (1648); Lozenge- Newark (1645-46). These are just a few.

Disasterous periods in history such as the ones that generated this coinage often forced entire towns and cities to rechannel their investments to pay the defending armies. Since all communication and contact with the outside world was cut off during a siege, payments were made with whatever gold or silver coin that could be collected. Likewise, when a besieging army exhausted its monetary resources, alternative methods of payment became necessary. The soldiers of that time were professionals and, like today's mercenaries, they wanted paid. So, when the coinage of the realm was dissipated, other sources of revenue were tapped. Sacred vessels of the church were seized and made into money. Naturally, during longer struggles, these too would become exhausted. After a time the plates and silver service of the governor, upper class and middle class citizens were confiscated. These were cut into pieces (ie. Landau 1703, 1713) and used to pay the garrison so that they could defend the town or at least hold fast until help could arrive.

As precious metals dwindled, baser metals were used: Tin- Schoonhoven (1575); Lead- Oudenarde (1582), Zierikzee (1575); Copper- Geneva (1590). Sheets of these metals were stripped from monuments, churches and public buildings.

They were cut into small pieces upon which was stamped an impression (usually an identifiable one such as initials or a coat of arms) and an amount (a familiar denomination) : Julich (1621), Middleburg (1572). Instant money! The process was such that in less than one hour coinage could be conceived, struck, and became legal tender. Since bronze and bell metal were considered valuable war materials, they were seldom used for coinage unless, for example, there were existing materials or circulating coins that could be melted and made into planchets for restriking (Mayence 1793).

When the base metal supply ran out, they made leather money. However, the people, who were generally starving at this stage of the siege, often ate the leather (Middleburg 1573). Sometimes it was necessary to resort to even more esoteric means to produce coinage. At Leyden (1574) covers and pages of the church missals and hymnals were pasted together, cut out, and "minted" to circulate as coins.

It can be said, then, by way of definition that siege coins are coins that have been struck, cast or otherwise produced under necessity circumstances. This was done primarily to pay troops to defend a town or city under siege or to finance the payment of the besieging army. In any case such coinage possessed an intrinsic value or a symbolic value. The coins with intrinsic value were such because of the precious metals used in their fabrication. The coins with symbolic value were those composed of baser metals or substances having a redemptive value subsequent to the siege. Of course, if you won you held something of value - intrinsically through metallic content or symbolically through redemption. If you lost, there were two alternatives: 1) the coins with intrinsic worth were considered the victor's booty and therefore were earmarked for the melting pot, and 2) the coins with symbolic value were worthless except as souvenirs. But, in the event that you lost, chances were that you were not around to collect them.

Nowadays we are around to collect these intriguing testaments to the struggles of yore. Not many siege coins have survived the ravages of fire, pestilence, and time when compared to the prolific numbers of coins produced in eras of tranquility. Nonetheless, siege coins are an important part of the world of numismatics.